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SUBJECT: TIBET: LOCAL AUTHORITIES MOVE TO RESTORE GRASSLANDS, BUT  
HIGH PLATEAU DESERT CONDITIONS SUGGEST EFFORTS MAY BE FAILING

CHENGDU 00000311 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) This cable contains sensitive but unclassified  
information - not for distribution on the Internet.

¶2. (SBU) Summary. The Director General of the Animal Husbandry Bureau in Lhoka Prefecture said recently that suitable grasslands for grazing animals were becoming increasingly scarce. To combat this, the Prefecture: introduced the grassland contract system, encouraged returning pastures to natural grasslands, and tried to limit the size of grazing herds. This official also blamed global warming for shrinking grasslands. Rising incomes and a growing population in Lhoka may also be contributing to increased demand for livestock and pressure to overgraze. ConGenOffs observed extensive, Sahara-like sand dunes in Lhoka, and large herds of goats appeared to be scavenging for every available blade of grass. Better seed varieties and veterinary health are improving rural incomes. More peasants are entering the cash economy and opening up bank accounts in an expanding rural financial system.  
End Summary.

Trying to Reign in the Herd,

But Desertification Appears to Be Worsening

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¶3. (SBU) Director General Tenzin, an ethnic Tibetan, told Consul General November 24 that his Bureau had noticed that land available in Lhoka for grazing animals had declined. In response to the loss of grasslands over the last several years, Tenzin said officials in Lhoka implemented rules on the number of animals permitted to graze per hectare of grassland. These rules are outlined under the grassland business contract responsibility system [caochang jingying chengbao zirenzhi], which include contracts that herders sign. Lhoka's grassland management practices align with the 2005 grassland management program outlined by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government, which have been implemented in most parts of the TAR. Officials aim to reduce the number of grazing animals, such as cows, by offering unspecified subsidies to farmers to sell or slaughter their livestock.

¶4. (SBU) Tenzin said that officials had fenced off certain areas to prohibit all grazing and allow grasslands time to grow (tuimu

huancao). Some bans on grazing in selected areas lasted for as long as five years -- a length of time consistent with the fragile, slow growth ecosystem of high altitude Tibetan plateaus. Without specifying the time, Tenzin said that the prefectural government had invested about 10 million USD to protect the grasslands. He claimed that these efforts had been successful in controlling grassland degradation and desertification, but did not provide specific data to support this claim.

15. Tenzin claimed that global warming also contributed to shrinking grassland, but did not explain why. He said only that Tibet's lakes were shrinking and its glaciers melting. (Note: As ConGenoffs travelled through the northern portions of the prefecture, which appeared in the dry season like a high-altitude desert, we passed by miles of fenced-in areas that may have been part of the grassland protection efforts. More prominent, however, were the extensive, Sahara-like sand dunes and large herds of goats that appeared to be scavenging for every available blade of grass. End Note.)

Rising, Wealthier Population

Contributing to Grassland Degradation?

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16. (SBU) Tenzin said that officials were worried about the impact that the increasing population would have on the environment. As of late 2006, the TAR government claimed the

CHENGDU 00000311 002.2 OF 002

prefecture had a population of about 330,000, up roughly 12,000 people from its 2000 level, and roughly double the population of the prefecture in 1959. (Note: Tenzin did not say how much the population would grow in the next 5-10 years, but another strain on the local environment may be the push for larger herds to generate income and feed an increasingly affluent population. The TAR government seeks to increase the per capita GDP in the prefecture to slightly more than 2,000 USD by the end of next year. End Note.)

Animal Husbandry Bureau Hits the Road to Improve Quality of Life

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17. (U) Tenzin explained that his Bureau had over 130 staff, the majority of whom are experts that spend a substantial portion of their time travelling to the prefecture's 82 townships. Technical advice and encouraging farmers to use better varieties of seed and livestock is making life better, Tenzin claimed. As an example of this, he mentioned that use of "winter wheat no. 6" had boosted harvests. Lhoka Prefecture will establish village veterinary stations throughout the Prefecture in 2010, Tenzin said. A very large investment in housing for animals in the prefecture has been completed, and has reduced winter losses.

TAR's Rural Banking System Expands

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18. (SBU) Tenzin also discussed how, with many more peasants and farmers now coming in closer contact with the cash economy, financial services including small loans were reaching every village through representatives of the China Agricultural Bank. Herders, whose traditional "bank accounts" were their herds, are now getting real bank accounts. The TAR expects within several years to implement the Golden Benefit Card debit card scheme, under which 30 million Chinese peasants can get government subsidies deposited to their debit card, thereby bypassing local officials who sometimes try to siphon off subsidies to support their own schemes. (Note: The China Economic Times on November 18 discussed the Golden Benefit Card and its 30 million peasant cardholders at URL [tinyurl.com/golden-benefit-card](http://tinyurl.com/golden-benefit-card). End Note.)  
BROWN